

"OUR CHIMNEY STILL SMOKES" JIRAXJI (B. 1926) -
A HUZHU MONGGHUL (TU) WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

I interviewed Jiraxji (b. 1926) of Jangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu (Mongghul) Autonomous County, Haidong City, Qinghai Province, PR China on 8 May 2018. Jiraxji describes Mongghul family structure and history, typifying traditional Mongghul extended families and relationships among relatives and clan members, especially childless families.

KEYWORDS

Mongghul (Monguor) biography, Himalaya women biography, oral Mongghul (Tu) history, Plateau life narratives, Qinghai studies

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I and my Mongghul wife, Jugui (b. 1969), visited Jiraxji (b. 1926) on 8 May 2018 at her home in Jangja¹ Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu (Mongghul) Autonomous County, Haidong City, Qinghai Province, PR China. I recorded my interview with an audio recorder. Later, I listened to the material, took notes in Mongghul, and wrote this text in English.

Jiraxji was born in Tughuangang Village, Wushi Town, Huzhu County and was adopted when she was about five months old. After becoming an adult and marrying, Jiraxji gave birth once to a child who died from illness.

Jiraxji's adopted daughter, Lansuuxji, was born in Xangri Village, Hongyazigou Township. One of the sons of Jiraxji's husband's brothers was invited to marry Lansuuxji and move into Jiraxji's home.

Jiraxji was ninety-two years old in 2018. A person who has lived this long is unusual in the Mongghul area. Her family structure and history are indicative of traditional Mongghul extended families and relationships among relatives and clan members as they pertain to childless families.

¹ The first Zhangjia Living Buddha, Zhabaeseer (?-1641), was born here in Zhangja Village. I use Mongghul terms and spellings. Variants of such terms are listed in the Non-English Terms at the end of this article.

FIG 1. Jiraxji (Jangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, China, 8 May 2018),



FIG 2. Jiraxji (front center), Lansuuxji (back left), and Lasiziniruu (back right) (Jangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, China, 20 October 2018).



FIG 3. Jiraxji's family courtyard (Jangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, China, 20 October 2018).



FIG 4. People

Name	Dates	Relationship to Jiraxji
Gunbuxji	Unknown	biological mother of Jiraxji's adopted daughter, Lansuuxji
Hgarima	1907-1968	adoptive father and maternal uncle
Jiraxji	b. 1926	self
Lamaxja	1926-1993	husband
Lansuuxji	b. 1948	adoptive daughter
Lasiziniruu	b. 1951	adoptive son
Xangxi	1899-1980	adoptive mother maternal aunt

Jiraxji was ninety-two-years old in 2018. Her home is located in the north part of Jangja Village, Hongyazigou Township, Huzhu County. She gets up every morning at six o'clock. After washing her face, she sweeps her family's shrine room as well as its corridors, and then enters the kitchen where her daughter, Lansuuxji (b. 1948), has already prepared embers in the kitchen hearth. For many years, Lansuuxji has repeated this morning work punctually. If not, Jiraxji scolds her.

Jiraxji took a ladle of embers from the stove and went out to the courtyard center where the *yansuuri* 'small garden plot' was located. A small triangular altar for burning juniper twigs had been built on top of the small garden wall. She put the embers on the altar, added a handful of juniper twigs, blew the embers into a blaze, and added a handful of *szuari* 'highland barley flour'. As smoke wafted above the altar, she sprinkled *quari* 'clean water' three times on the burning juniper and flour. Facing the altar, Jiraxji made three prostrations to Shge Tingere luan purghan 'Great Heaven and all the deities'.

Next, she went to her family shrine room where she emptied water from seven small copper bowls lined up on a wooden table. The day before water had been added to the bowls from a vat in the kitchen. Jiraxji rubbed the empty bowls with an oily towel, lined them up again,

filled them with pure water, and offered them to Buddhas and all the deities to whom she made three prostrations.¹

Afterwards, she went to the kitchen where Lansuuxji had boiled black tea, filled a ceramic bowl with tea, walked to the shrine room, offered tea to the Buddhas and deities, and piously made three more prostrations on a floor mat that was tattered and faded, testimony to countless prostrations over many years.

Once these morning duties were completed, Jiraxji rested, sitting cross-legged on the cushion in her family shrine room. She leaned against the side wall and turned a *manii* 'string of prayer beads' in her right hand. As she repeated, "*O manii banii huang*," Lansuuxji brought a bowl of black tea and placed it on the floor in front of Jiraxji and urged her to drink some.

Her eyesight was good, for example, she sewed her own clothes. However, her back and knees ached and she was completely deaf in her right ear. It was necessary to speak loudly in her left ear in order for her to hear. She avoided the company of others because she was hardly able to understand what they said and felt guilty not being able to respond. Her happiest moments were when her great-grandsons came home on the weekends or holidays from school and when her great-granddaughters regularly came to visit her from their husbands' homes. Jiraxji had cared for them and had shared a bed with them when they were children.

Sipping her tea and fingering her *manii*, she said:

It's so good if I die soon. This is the only way I can relieve all my pain and suffering but, when will I die? My family and others wish for me to have a longer life, but who will take away my pain and suffering if I live longer? Only I endure my suffering. Nobody else can help me. Truly! A longer life is suffering for me. Old family members, relatives, and villagers have already died. I'm the only one left.

Several days ago, I was feeding my family's swine in front of my courtyard compound. A man came in his tractor to sell piglets. He looked

¹ There are no physical deity images in the shrine room. She prostrates to Buddhas and deities that she imagines.

at me for a long time and finally spoke, but I couldn't hear what he said. Lansuuxji then came and spoke into my ear. The swine seller could hardly believe that I was ninety-two. He said that he had never seen such an old person in our Mongghul area.

Her recollections took her into the past:

One day, Hgarima (1907-1968), who was both my adoptive father and maternal uncle, visited my biological parents' home in Tughuangang, a village on top of a mountain in Wushi Town. When he entered my home, he found my parents had gone out to do farm work in the fields. A five-month old baby girl (me) was tied with a long thin rope around my waist belt to a roof rafter above the sitting and sleeping platform to keep me from crawling away. I was crying sadly. I cried loudly when I saw Hgarima. Long scraggy hair covered my neck and half of my face. Various bits of trash were tangled in my hair. My body was covered in a *huuguazi* 'coarse wool garment' knotted at my back. It was soiled with feces and urine. My face was smeared with dirt. My eyes were turning and emitting glimmers of light.

Hgarima felt very sad to see me. He wiped my eyes and mouth, and the snot from my dirty face with his garment sleeve. He thought I was suffering without care from my family. Believing that I was in danger of dying because my family was unable to take good care of me because of their heavy work in and outside of their home, he untied me, held me, and took me to his home in Jangja Village.

My mother was Hgarima's elder sister. She married into Father's home in Tughuangang Village.

Late that night, Father rushed to Hgarima's home and found I was there. Father happily inquired, "Why did you bring Jiraxji to your home?"

"Jiraxji will die if I don't bring her. She's too young to take care of herself. We know that you and your wife are very busy. Please leave her here. We can take good care of her," Hgarima replied.

Father agreed, thinking it was a good idea to leave me at my maternal uncle's home because only in this way would I be well cared for, since he and Mother were unable to do so.

From then on, I have been a member of Hgarima's family.

My parents once asked Hgarima and his wife, Xangxi (1899-1980), to return me to their home in Tughuangang, but Hgarima and his wife suggested that I stay with them until I was older.

As I grew up, I was accustomed to living here in Hgarima's home and finally both families agreed that I would become Hgarima and Xangxi's adopted daughter and permanently live with them.

Hgarima and Xangxi had a son, Lamaxja, who was born in the same year as Jiraxji. They played and grew up together in Hgarima's home.

When Lamaxja and I were four or five years old, Hgarima and Xangxi had a poor life because government taxes on forage and grain were heavy, Hgarima had several brothers, few fields, and crop yields were poor. My [adoptive] parents had a little farm land. In order to make a better living they took me and Lamaxja to live in Tughuangang Village where we shared a courtyard compound with my biological parents. My adoptive parents bought some farm land from others, and cultivated it for a couple of years. Once harvested, they moved the grain and straw into our original home in Jangja Village. Eventually, Hgarima and Xangxi decided to leave Tughuangang Village because there was little farmland, and crop yields were poor.

At someone's suggestion, our family moved to Morighuali¹ Village in today's Hongyazigou Township where my parents bought a courtyard compound and some fields. We worked hard and had good crop yields, but some local villagers were very jealous of our family, who they saw as "outsiders" in their village, and deliberately made things difficult for us. Eventually we also left Morighuali Village after selling the courtyard compound and our fields.

My family then moved to today's Lawaa Village, Danma Town where we bought fields from locals, built a courtyard compound some distance from the center of Lawaa Village, and farmed. That's how we made our lives.

¹ Horse Valley.

One night after we had gone to bed when I was about ten years old, two thieves suddenly rushed in. The shorter of the two thieves jumped on the sleeping platform and grabbed a sword hanging on the wall. The thieves had previously noticed the sword that my [adoptive] father had prepared in case there was this sort of situation.

The thieves shouted at us, ordering us to remain where we were on the sleeping platform. We were terrified. They shoved Father back onto the sleeping platform, tied his hands behind his back with a rope, and then hung him from the house beam. They beat Father with a club and the sword, shouting, "Tell us, where the new carpets are that your family recently bought? Give them to us right now! Otherwise, we'll kill all of you!"

"I have no new carpets," Father replied firmly.

They then resumed torturing Father.

At this juncture, a woman from Huarin Village who my family had hired to work in our home, ran outside, rushed to the village center, and asked villagers to rescue us. The anxious thieves then fled before the villagers arrived.

My family regretted not living in the village center which was why we had become the thieves' target. Worried about future attacks, we finally sold our courtyard compound and fields, and left Lawaa in search of a new place to live a better life.

We moved to Wughuang Village in today's Wushi Town where we bought fields and constructed a house inside a walled compound.

A couple of years later on the sixth day of the fifth lunar month, as I was on the way to my home from my biological parents' home in Tughuangang. I encountered an old man with a pockmarked face. He said, "Your home was attacked by bandits last night. Go there as quickly as possible. I saw your mother walking down the road this morning looking for things that had been stolen and left on the road by the bandits."

When I got home, everyone was very upset. Thieves had secretly come into my home in Wughuang Village late at night, untied the horses in the stable, taken many valuables including even our shoes, put everything on horseback, and then left. My [adoptive] mother had slept upstairs while Father, Lamaxja, Lamaxja's close friend, and the friend's son, had slept on the sleeping platform in the kitchen not noticing the

thieves at all. The fifth day of the fifth lunar month was an important local festival¹ so the men were completely drunk, which is why they were unaware of the thieves.

Further thefts convinced my parents to return to their original home in Jangja Village so they sold our courtyard compound and fields in Wughuang Village. They had decided that Jangja Village was safest, however, life in Jangja Village was as harsh as ever due to poor crop yields.

There was a discussion among my family members – both adoptive and biological – and clan members when Lamaxja and I were fourteen years old. Agreement was reached that Lamaxja and I should marry and live in my adoptive parents' home. A wedding was then held for us at our home. Lamaxja and I had grown up and played together in one home and finally married each other. We were duty bound to serve Hgarima and Xangxi in their old age.

Six years after our marriage, I gave birth to a baby who got ill and died after a year. That was my only pregnancy. Years later, as my [adoptive] parents were getting older, they were very anxious because Lamaxja and I were childless.

One day, Xangxi visited her parents' home in Xangri Village [today's Hongyazigou Township] and lamented to her parents that I was childless. She wondered how I and Lamaxja would live when we were old. Seeing Xangxi's extreme grief, Gunbuxji, Xangxi's brother's wife, said, "Please don't be sad. We are relatives. We should help you. You see I am pregnant. I will give birth in the eighth month this year. I promise to give this baby to you no matter if it is a boy or a girl."

Excited to hear such good news, Xangxi promised to return to take the baby, and then returned to our home in Jangja Village.

In the eighth lunar month that year Gunbuxji gave birth to a baby daughter who was named Lansuuxji.

In the second lunar month of the following year, when Lansuuxji was six months old, Xangxi thought Lansuuxji was old enough to be separated from her mother, so one morning in 1949, Xangxi got up early and again went to her parents' home in Xangri. The family was having breakfast when she arrived. After greeting each other, Xangxi directly told

¹ Tawun Sarani Xni Tawun.

them that she had come to take Lansuuxji to her home in Jangja Village. All the family members expressed shock. Gunbuxji, who was nursing Lansuuxji, protested, "No! I don't want to give my daughter to you!"

"Have you forgotten that you agreed to give the baby to me many months ago? How can you so easily break your promise?" Xangxi exclaimed with tears in her eyes.

The family was silent.

"Dear parents and my dearest relatives, don't you all want to support me? My daughter, Jiraxji, will not give birth again, which means my family will surely be childless and *yantangni funiini jiligha adaguna* 'our chimney will stop smoking'. How terrible for me to die in grief for having no younger generations in my family!" Xangxi continued, weeping sadly.

Standing up, Xangxi took Lansuuxji from Gunbuxji, and declared, "I promise Lansuuxji will grow up happy in my home under my family's care."

Xangxi left with Lansuuxji in her arms and trotted up a hill without looking back. As she arrived atop the hill, she saw that her parents and other relatives were watching from the front gate of their house. Gunbuxji was following her.

"Please go home now! Rest assured that my family and I will take good care of Lansuuxji," Xangxi shouted to Gunbuxji.

"No! I cannot live without my daughter! I need my Lansuuxji!" Gunbuxji answered loudly and wept.

Undeterred, Xangxi began descending the hill in direction of her home located at the foot of the hill.

Gunbuxji followed Xangxi closely, hoping Xangxi would be moved and return the baby. However, she soon lost hope. It was clear that Xangxi wouldn't return her daughter. When Xangxi was very near her home compound, Gunbuxji stopped and stood for a long while until Xangxi entered the front gate of the compound. Gunbuxji then despondently returned to her own home in Xangri Village.

Lansuuxji brought new hope to my family. She became Xangxi and Hgarima's adopted granddaughter. Xangxi had cared for me and now Xangxi took care of Lansuuxji. My five-member family had a happy life farming and raising livestock.

Later in 1966, Lansuuxji turned eighteen, a marriageable age. According to our traditions, a girl marries and moves into her husband's home. Lansuuxji's case was different. Because her family had no son, she had to stay at home to "keep the family chimney smoking" and for her family to continue.

During the last lunar month in 1966, her adoptive and biological parents and clan members met. The result was that Lasiziniruu (b. 1951) was chosen to become Lansuuxji's husband and move into our home and become a member of our family. A wedding ceremony was held for Lansuuxji and Lasiziniruu in our home.

Hgarima had five brothers. Lasiziniruu was the third brother's oldest son. According to custom, if a man had no son, the family first asked one of his brothers to give a son to become that man's son. If the man had no brothers, then the family sought a "son" for him from one of his sisters, clan members, or other relative.

Hgarima and Xangxi were Lasiziniruu's "grandparents" and Jiraxji and Lamaxja were his "parents" in the home. Jiraxji's family grew again.

Two years later in 1968, Hgarima fell ill and died.

Twelve years later in 1980, Xangxi became ill and died.

Lamaxja died in 1993 from illness.

Lansuuxji gave birth to two sons and three daughters. The three daughters married and moved into their husbands' homes. The first and second sons have two children each.

Every time my granddaughters come visit, I am very excited to talk with them and sleep with them. I also have a very nice relationship with my grandsons and great-grandsons.

Lasiziniruu and Lansuuxji take good care of me.

I have an extremely harmonious family. We now have happy lives.

"Mother, I have prepared breakfast and am waiting for you," Lansuuxji called, standing by the shrine room door.

Jiraxji stood with difficulty and made her way to the kitchen. Once she was seated and about to take bread from the table she again said, "Why am I still alive? I should leave this world..."

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Danma 丹麻 Town

Gunbuxji, a person's name

Haidong 海东 City

Hgarima, a person's name

Hongyazigou 红崖子沟 Township

Huarin, Hualin 桦林 Village

huuguazi, coarse wool garment

Huzhu 互助 County

Jangja, Zhangjia 张家 Village

Jiraxji, a person's name

Jugui, a person's name

Lamaxja, a person's name

Lansuuxji, a person's name

Lasiziniruu, a person's name

Lawaa, Lawa 拉哇 Village

Limusishiden, Li Dechun 李得春, a person's name

manii, ma Ni མ་ནི། string of prayer beads¹

Mongghul, Monguor, Mangghuer, Tu, Tuzu 土族

Morighuali, Maorigou 毛日沟 Village

pei, shaokang 烧炕, a heatable raised platform

phreng nga ཕྱེང་ང༌།

O manii banii huang, oM ma Ni pa d+me hU~M ཨོ་མ་ནི་པ་ད་མེ་ཨུ་མ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ། religious
recitation

Qinghai 青海 Province

¹ In Tibetan, a string of prayer beads is known as *phreng nga*. In Mongghul, it is *manii*.

quari, clean water

Shge Tingere luan purghan, Great Heaven and all the deities

szuari, highland barley flour

Tawun Sarani Xni Tawun, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

Tughuangang, Tughuanshan 土官山 Village

Wughuang, Bahong 巴洪 Village

Wushi 五十 Town

Xangri, Shenlu 神路 Village

Xangxi, a person's name

xrai, low rectangular wooden table

yantangni funiini jiligha adaguna, our chimney will stop smoking

Zhabaeseer, a person's name

Zhangja, Zhangjia 张家 Village